

DIVERSITY NEWS

May 2007

Yvonne: People are different...

Thomas: You can say that again!

Yvonne: People are different...not just in terms of age, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, sexual orientation, or political affiliation.

There is a multitude of diversity dimensions that affect who we are and how we see the world.

Thomas: And because we don't all see the world in the same way, disagreements are inevitable.

And these disagreements, these conflicts, can affect our relationships, as well as our ability to get our work done.

Yvonne: Diversity management is a process intended to create and maintain a positive work environment—an environment in which the similarities and differences of individuals are valued....

An environment in which all employees can reach their potential and maximize their contributions to their organization's strategic goals and objectives.

Thomas: One aspect of the diversity management process has to do with the manner in which conflict is resolved.

In this edition of Diversity News, we'll take a look at several strategies for resolving conflict, in ways that promote personal and organizational productivity.

Thomas: In their best-selling book, *Resolving Conflicts at Work*, Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith explain how workplace disputes actually provide opportunities for increasing creativity, productivity, employee morale, and personal growth.

To take advantage of these opportunities, Cloke and Goldsmith describe a series of eight strategies:

Change the culture and context of conflict.

Listen actively, empathetically, and responsively.

Acknowledge and integrate emotions to solve problems.

Search beneath the surface for hidden meaning.

Separate what matters from what gets in the way.

Learn from, and don't reward, difficult behaviors.

Solve problems creatively, plan strategically, and negotiate collaboratively.

And... explore resistance, mediate disputes, and design systems for prevention and resolution.

Yvonne: As Cloke and Goldsmith point out, EVERY workplace has customs or expectations that affect how people behave when they are in conflict.

Some organizational cultures reinforce conflict avoidance or accommodation.

Other organizational cultures reward competition and aggression.

And other organizational cultures encourage passive-aggressive behavior.

More positive organizational cultures support genuine collaboration between opponents.

In these organizations, conflict is addressed through open, creative dialogue regarding problems...

Through honest, empathetic, self-critical leadership in addressing and responding to conflicts...

And...through preventative, persistent, systemic approaches to conflict resolution.

Cloke and Goldsmith offer several suggestions for improving the conflict culture of an organization. For example:

Honestly and non-aggressively communicating our differences, and openly discussing issues with others, in a spirit of trying to find solutions.

Empathizing with our opponents and acknowledging their contributions to our learning and development.

Encouraging consensus regarding organizational vision, mission, goals, and shared values.

And...inviting opponents to engage in dialogue and collaborative negotiation in order to solve common problems.

Thomas: Listening to your opponents actively, empathetically, responsively, and with an open heart and mind can encourage them to do the same for you.

Cloke and Goldsmith offer more than a dozen techniques to open up communications, invite people to share their feelings and points of view, and allow the discovery of what is beneath the surface of a conflict.

For example, using questions and comments to encourage opponents to share their feelings, their perceptions, and their attitudes.

Also, using questions and comments to clarify points made by opponents send a signal that you are interested in understanding their perspective.

acknowledging the feelings your opponents express can also encourage greater openness, as can empathizing with your opponents, by imagining yourself in their position.

Other suggestions include soliciting your opponents' advice in order to identify possible solutions,

Identifying the issues on which you are in agreement,

And validating specific points your opponents have made that you have found particularly useful in the conversation.

Yvonne: As Cloke and Goldsmith point out, every conflict triggers intense emotional reactions. And these reactions can keep people stuck in their own perspectives.

According to Cloke and Goldsmith, it's possible for people to express these feelings constructively...

By shifting from negative forms of "venting" and "dumping" to more positive forms of owning our feelings,

By discovering the deeper meaning of our feelings,

And...by encouraging empathy with others.

Cloke and Goldsmith offer several methods for managing intense emotions. For example:

Experience your emotions fully, without suppressing them.

Observe your emotions over time, to understand them more clearly.

Accept your emotions without judgment, seeing them as a source of information.

Analyze your emotions for underlying causes or origins.

Communicate your emotions as information, not as judgments.

And channel your emotions into problem solving.

Thomas: According to Cloke and Goldsmith, interpersonal conflicts are, at their core, generally more profound than the relatively superficial issues that we argue over.

In order to fully resolve our conflicts, they say, we must search below their surface to discover their true source.

For example, there may be significant issues that have not been discussed or identified,

Important differences in the personalities of people involved in the conflict,

Unexpressed emotions,

Unsatisfied needs or desires,

Issues of self-esteem or self-perception,

Hidden (perhaps unrealistic) expectations,

Or... unresolved issues from the past.

Some ways of getting below the surface of conflicts include:

Focusing on yourself and understanding more about your own hidden issues.

Using open-ended questions and active, empathetic, responsive listening to understand your opponents' hidden issues.

Recognizing that the more honest and vulnerable you are with yourself, the deeper you will be able to go with others.

And...accepting whatever you find beneath the surface, without shame, anger, or judgment.

Yvonne: The first step in resolving conflicts, according to Cloke and Goldsmith, is to separate what is important from what gets in the way. For example:

Separating interests from positions.

Separating problems from people.

Separating solutions from problems.

Separating commonalities from differences.

Separating the future from the past.

Separating negotiation from emotion.

Separating content from process.

Separating options from choices.

Separating criteria from selection.

And, separating ourselves from others.

By focusing on what really matters to us and to those with whom we are in conflict, we increase the likelihood of moving beyond simply settling conflicts, to, instead, resolving the underlying reasons behind them.

Thomas: Cloke and Goldsmith point out that there are four fundamental ways of skillfully responding to people whose behavior you find difficult.

First, you can take responsibility for your OWN attitudes and behaviors, including those that trigger unpleasant reactions or difficult behaviors in others.

Second, you can listen to what others are saying and observe empathetically what they are doing, in an effort to understand what may be taking place beneath the surface of their behavior.

Third, you can communicate honestly to them that what they are doing is difficult for you to handle.

And you can suggest alternatives.

According to Cloke and Goldsmith, when you focus your attention on self-improvement, you become less vulnerable to other peoples' behaviors.

And, by changing the way you respond to what THEY do, you encourage them to alter the way THEY are acting.

Yvonne: After you've listened actively, empathetically, and responsively to your opponents (and, in return, been listened to by them)...

After you've acknowledged and processed your emotions related to the issues of concern...

After you've searched beneath the surface of conflicts to uncover their hidden meanings...

After you've separated what matters from what gets in the way...

And after you've learned from (and altered your response to) your opponents' difficult behaviors, you will have gone a considerable distance toward defining the real problem...

Now, you can begin searching for creative solutions.

According to Cloke and Goldsmith, Problem solving is fundamentally a 5-step process:

The first step is to become aware of the problem and accept it as something that needs to be solved.

The second step is to collaboratively define and clarify the elements and nature of the problem, so you can better understand how to approach it strategically.

The third step is to jointly analyze, categorize, and prioritize the elements of the problem.

The fourth step is to generate options, assess alternative criteria, and jointly invent solutions that satisfy everyone's interests.

The fifth step is to take specific, concrete, committed action to solve the problem.

Then, evaluate your results and give each other feedback, so you can learn from what you did and continue to become better problem solvers.

Thomas: Cloke and Goldsmith acknowledge that following their suggestions does not guarantee the successful resolution of conflicts. People may be too close to the issues involved to respond creatively.

or the issues may be too complex to solve without outside assistance.

or emotions or positions may have become entrenched.

or the organizational culture may discourage resolution. What then?

Cloke and Goldsmith offer several suggestions:

Reassessing options,

Exploring the hidden sources of resistance to resolution,

Considering mediation to help end the dispute,

or turning attention to ways of redesigning organizational structures, systems, and culture in order to prevent or resolve disputes before they escalate.

Yvonne: Cloke and Goldsmith offer a dozen suggestions for getting past “stuck” and onto the path of conflict resolution.

First, set the stage for dialogue, by moving to a neutral environment and by being open, honest, and friendly.

Disengage your “fight-or-flight” response and listen actively, empathetically, and responsively to your opponent.

State clearly, and without anger or fear of rejection, your emotional needs and self-interests. And listen carefully to those of your opponents.

Look below the surface of what is being said, in order to resolve the underlying reasons for the dispute.

Separate the person from the problem, the future from the past, and positions from interests.

Brainstorm all possible solutions to your conflict, and develop criteria for how to resolve it.

Negotiate collaboratively rather than aggressively, and clarify the values, standards, or rules that will help resolve the dispute fairly and result in mutual satisfaction.

Let go of your judgments about your opponents, and focus instead on improving your own skills in handling difficult behaviors.

Don't surrender just so the conflict will go away.

Recognize the larger organizational and social issues that express themselves through your conflict, and discover how you can engage in committed actions and contribute to a more peaceful world.

And, finally, search for closure. Make sure that you express everything you need to say, and that your opponents express everything they need to say.

Yvonne: Cloke and Goldsmith point out that, because everyone is different, and every person is different from moment to moment, there can be no single strategy that will work for everyone, all the time, in every situation.

The best we can do, they say, is find our own way...

Through honesty and empathy,

Analysis and intuition,

Reflection and curiosity,

Precision and kindness,

Awareness and equanimity.

Seeing what works and what does not work, and changing as we go.

Thomas: Speaking of going, that's all we have time for in THIS edition of Diversity News. We appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink.

Just send an e-mail message to dmeeo@va.gov, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from you!

If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words "Diversity News" in the subject line.

Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!